THE DISCOVERY OF A GOLD TORC AT MOULSFORD

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On July 22nd 1960 Mr. F. J. Thomas of Aldworth brought into Reading Museum for identification a remarkable gold torc which he had discovered while driving a cultivator across the large field owned by Mr. C. G. Venables of Greenlands Farm, Moulsford (SU 583840). The torc had apparently been brought to the surface by previous ploughing and no other objects were found with it. At an inquest held in December 1960 by the Wallingford coroner it was declared not to be Treasure Trove, and, expressing his wish that such an important antiquity should remain in Berkshire, Mr. C. G. Venables offered to sell the torc to Reading Museum. In making the purchase the museum was assisted by grants from the National Art Collections Fund, the funds administered by the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Berkshire County Council. Advice and full co-operation from the British Museum was also received and the torc is now on display in Reading Museum.

The torc consists of four square bars of gold alloy,[1] about a quarter of an inch thick and 12 inches long, twisted spirally and bent to form an incomplete hoop: one pair twisted in the opposite direction to the other. An inch and a half at each end has been left untwisted, but this is concealed by the sheet gold socket terminals. The bars are held together by a binding of spirally-twisted gold wire, probably the survivor of a pair. The terminals are decorated with a geometric engraved design of triangles and rectangles and the whole ornament weighs about a pound. The torc is shown on Plate I as found, slightly bent and one of the terminals damaged, but it has now been restored to its original shape in the laboratory of the British Museum.

No other gold torc of exactly this form is known in this country or on the Continent. Professor C. F. C. Hawkes has summarised (in "Antiquity", XXXV, 1961, pp. 240–242) the evidence for its date. Comparing it to other known gold torcs found in Britain he writes: "The hook-end form of our bar torcs, as being more secure, was always more popular than the plain-ended form represented by the Moulsford strands. The plain ends of this form itself, eventually, were converted to act as hooks by being bent back outwards, to produce the handsome outstanding terminals of the well-known 'Yeovil' or Tara type. To that type, in fact, belongs the only other multiple-strand torc known from the Bronze Age in the British Isles: that in the Towednack gold hoard from West Cornwall, where the strands are of tight-twisted slender rod, twined gently round each other and conjoined into a single pair of terminals. But no torc of the 'Yeovil' type has been dated earlier than what some have called Late Bronze 1, or in Ireland Late Bronze A, others in Britain a phase transitional to Late from Middle Bronze Age (Middle Bronze 3), but in either case belonging to the couple

[1] At the time of writing (March 1962) analysis of the metal by the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art has shown that it is a natural alloy with a 75–80% gold content and silver and copper in varying proportions. I am indebted to Mr. Roberts of the laboratory for this information prior to publication.

of centuries after 1000 B.C., and not before. And those torcs are so plentifully represented in Southern Britain that our type with unbent plain ends, which has never been found associated with them, should certainly be confined in date to the preceding phase, along with its counterparts in bronze and the simple hook-ended specimens in both metals. Its twisted binding-wire is likewise normal for that time. That is, the Moulsford torc should be Middle Bronze 2, and belongs to the century or two before 1000 B.C.; most probably to the 12th, when torc-making was still a new art in the British Isles." Professor Hawkes points out that the traced decoration on the terminals of hatched bands and triangles offset by plain spaces has an Early Bronze Age ancestry, most obvious among the Irish lunulae, and he concludes that the "Thames Valley population in Middle Bronze 2 was presumably related in culture to the 'Deverel-Rimbury' people best known in Wessex. The Moulsford torc is an unexpected but not wholly surprising witness to their wealth and to their Irish contacts, in about the 12th century B.C."

Some investigations were made by the staff of Reading Museum in September and October, 1960, to determine whether further gold or other objects existed in the neighbourhood where the torc was discovered. An area 300 ft. by 200 ft. was investigated with a proton magnetometer operated by Dr. Aitken and also with a mine locator and a 4a mine detector by the Royal Engineers H.Q. Bomb Disposal Unit. Apart from some modern iron scraps no metal was located within this area. The field is situated about 100 ft. above the River Thames to the East at the point of discovery. The land gently slopes towards the river and an average of 18 inches of loamy soil overlies the chalk: erratics mainly of quartzite are scattered in the soil, derived from a patch of gravel containing Northern drift at the top of the slope to the West. No visible features can be detected on the field save two ploughed-over field banks unlikely to be of any antiquity. The proton magnetometer, however, indicated a line of disturbance about 100 feet away from the spot where the torc was discovered and excavation revealed here a steep-sided, flat-bottomed ditch cut into the chalk, 6 feet deep. The lower fillings of this ditch contained pottery sherds, bone fragments and charcoal, presumably the refuse from some occupied site which had existed nearby. A Middle to Late Bronze Age date has been suggested for the sherds but further material and excavation is necessary before the full significance of this can be understood. No other artificial features were detected and the stripping of the plough soil and sub-soil from an area 40 feet by 20 feet, centred upon the point at which Mr. Thomas picked up the torc, produced nothing but a 4th century Roman coin and a flat, featureless floor of chalk.

Further investigations are planned but it is unlikely they will explain how this splendid gold ornament came to be buried by itself in the sub-soil at Moulsford.